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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 000219

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [KWBG](#) [KPAL](#) [KDEM](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: ARE JORDAN'S ISLAMISTS STRONGER IN THE WAKE OF GAZA?

REF: A. AMMAN 147 AND PREVIOUS

- [1B](#). 08 AMMAN 3116
- [1C](#). 08 AMMAN 1871
- [1D](#). 08 AMMAN 1570

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[11.](#) (C) Summary: Jordan's Islamists are seeking to parlay a string of highly organized demonstrations on Gaza into broader political influence. The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood (JMB) and its political wing, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), have been increasingly direct in their criticism of the King. The government is now seeking to rein in Islamist efforts to influence public opinion. The JMB and IAF achieved visibility from the Gaza crisis, but may have difficulty translating their performance into long-term political support. End Summary.

Islamists Organized in Protesting Gaza

[12.](#) (C) During the three weeks of Israeli operations in Gaza, Islamists organized an estimated 84 of the 624 protests held in Jordan, according to press reports. Islamist rallies were remarkable for their organization, turnout, and the often fiery tone of the speakers. Amman Governor Sa'ad Al-Manaseer portrayed the demonstrations as peaceful for the most part, but added that they almost became uncontrollable on several occasions. He cited in particular IAF-organized demonstrations outside of the Israeli Embassy, in which protesters maintained a constant vigil in a tent from which protests were launched on successive Fridays after noon prayers. Demonstrators became violent and the police had to resort to tear gas and batons on at least two separate occasions to control the crowd.

[13.](#) (C) Emboldened by their success, the IAF-controlled Professional Associations Union organized a January 23 rally to celebrate the "victory of the resistance in the Gaza Strip." During the rally, IAF head Zaki Beni-Irshaid called Hamas "the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people" and urged humanitarian aid from Jordan to be sent directly to Hamas rather than the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). Note: Prince Ali told the Ambassador that Islamist leaders wanted to invite Hamas leaders from Damascus to this event, but the government intervened. End Note. On January 19, the IAF announced a "national reform initiative" -- a backhanded reference to the official National Agenda for reform (Ref B). The IAF plan proposes constitutional reforms that would allow Jordanians to elect and monitor their government directly. IAF officials who announced the plan indicated that it would change the makeup of Jordan's parliament, making it more representative of popular views that strongly oppose a move to have Jordan serve as a replacement for a Palestinian state.

Critical, But Not Too Critical

¶4. (C) The JMB and IAF criticized the stances of moderate Arab states during the Gaza crisis but calibrated their words for different audiences. At a December 30 demonstration organized by the IAF and attended by 2,000 protesters, speakers made blanket statements denouncing all Arab leaders (without excluding the King) and accused the Jordanian government of imposing limits on Islamists in Jordan in part of a larger anti-Islamist conspiracy that had led to events in Gaza. In a January 18 interview with pro-Palestinian daily Al-Dustour, however, JMB leader Hamam Sa'id called Jordan's political stance "advanced" and "honorable" while harshly attacking moderate Arab states (whose response to the crisis was essentially identical to Jordan's). A January 22 posting on the IAF website accused the government of "continuing its vacillation" and "wagering on the losing horse" -- a cryptic reference to either the Palestinian Authority or moderate Arab states such as Egypt.

GOJ Strikes Back

¶5. (C) Now that hostilities have ceased, the government is starting to reassert its authority. The King's half-brother and commander of his personal security detail, Prince Ali, told the Ambassador on January 22 that the Islamists were being "put back in the box," with the GOJ denying permission to bring Hamas leaders from Damascus to attend the January 23 rally. Additionally, the suspension of provisions in Jordan's Public Gatherings Law that required protest organizers to obtain prior permission for demonstrations (Ref C) have been reimposed, with Interior Minister Eid Al-Fayez telling opposition daily Al-Arab Al-Yawm on January 25 that

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the Public Gatherings Law is again fully in effect. Governor Manaseer (who normally reviews such requests for demonstrations), called the decision to temporarily suspend the Public Gatherings Law during the Israeli operations nothing more than a practical and necessary accommodation to "extraordinary events."

Did the JMB and IAF Benefit?

¶6. (C) As the GOJ seeks to rein in Jordanian Islamists, the political elite outside the Islamist movement has expressed skepticism that the IAF and MB will be able to broaden or even maintain their current level of public influence. Governor Manaseer said the IAF and MB rode the bandwagon of public outrage over a "humanitarian crisis" rather than led it. Political analyst Jemal Refai agreed that the IAF and JMB effectively used popular emotion to demonstrate the necessity of their agenda, but added that translating that emotion into effective political support is much harder to do. MP Nasser Al-Qaisi asserted that the Islamists' gains from Gaza will be short-lived and that the demonstrations were more a move against Israel rather than a show of support for Hamas.

King's Performance Gets Mixed Reviews

¶7. (C) While doubting that Jordanian Islamists would be able to expand on their ability to mobilize the public, some observers expressed mixed reviews of the King's management of the domestic response to Gaza. Several contacts told us that by showing flexibility and restraint, the state effectively sidestepped claims that it was not doing everything in its power to end the Gaza crisis. Others such as Mohammad Abu Rumman, an Al-Ghad columnist and former JMB member, cited the King's reluctance to criticize Hamas as a sign of weakness. Several contacts agreed that the Islamists were poised to exploit the political emotions of Palestinian-origin Jordanians, and that allowing such emotions to become public would ultimately result in a decreased ability on the part of the government to control future incidents. Political talk

show host Mohammed Momani told Pol Chief that the King and the government essentially allowed the Islamists to control the debate by not offering a cohesive explanation of government policy on Gaza.

Comment

¶ 8. (C) The Gaza protests, which our interlocutors saw as a necessary accommodation to public opinion, also created space for the JMB and IAF to operate and build support. The Islamists' timely, coordinated actions undoubtedly gained them some points among average Jordanians, particularly those of Palestinian origin. It remains to be seen whether that will translate into long-term political gain.

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